

EVA KAUFMANN

BAHNHOFSTRASSE 20
9020 KLAGENFURT

0650/4835830
EKAUFMAN@EDU.UNI-KLU.AC.AT



Büro für Internationale Beziehungen
Fr. Mag.^a Nesen Ertugrul
Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt
Universitätsstraße 65-67
9020 Klagenfurt

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FINAL REPORT ON JOINT-STUDY IN MUMBAI

Dear Mag.^a Ertugrul,

As per the requirements of the Joint-Study-Programme I herewith submit my final report of my stay at the University of Mumbai, a Joint-Study-Partner University of the Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt, from June 2009 until March 2010.

The responsible coordinator in Mumbai is Dr.ⁱⁿ Vibha Surana, the head of the German Department. I would like to point out, that she did everything before my arrival in order to work things out with the administration of the University of Mumbai. There is no coordinating department at the UoM for international students so far, since there are hardly any foreign students. Therefore it is up to the individual department, which invites the students to take care of everything. This makes it a little bit complicate and actually there was no assistance regarding accommodation, airport pick-up or similar topics. The Department of Philosophy was supposed to assist me in these matters but did not react to the request of Dr.ⁱⁿ Surana or to my emails. Luckily I got a very nice apartment within a half hour's bus drive from the campus that has been left to me from a befriended Indian family, who currently lives in the United States. (A few months later I eventually shifted to accommodation provided by the university.) There is a possibility for students to reside either at the hostels on the campus (although they have stricter rules then our students are probably used to) or to rent a room in the campus's guesthouse or a flat in the J.P.Naik Bhavan respectively (some of the few flats there are in quite bad shape though), since most of the available hostel rooms are reserved for Indian students. Another option would be to stay as a PG (paying guest) with a family

somewhere near the campus. There are many offers to be found via newspapers or even internet.

There is also a collaboration between several German universities, one of which is Magdeburg from where each year 3 to 5 students come to Mumbai. Only because of these students I got to know about the other accommodation facilities and that they usually hand over the apartment (Wohngemeinschaft) from one to the other.

Besides these challenges in the beginning I was experiencing a warm welcome and right from my first day in Mumbai I was participating in an internal certificated teacher's training course as part of my studies here (equalling approximately 1 Semesterwochenstunde). All students and the staff of the German Department, which consists of only two persons plus office staff and visiting faculties, were very helpful and guided me through my first steps in this immense big and unusual city. I must admit, however, that for younger students with less experience in travelling to Asian countries it could be quite a challenge to come here. Therefore the cooperation should be better coordinated for visiting students. Since there is, however, no valid MoU between Mumbai and Klagenfurt as per now this has to be taken in consideration, when (and if) the contract will be renewed.

Another issue is the fact that not all of the Departments at the UoM follow the semester system yet. Many of them, including the Department of Philosophy, follow the academic year, which means that courses can only be finalized with marks after two semesters. In addition it is not possible to participate in the written final exams (be it semester or year), since they are centrally coordinated. Exchange students are not enrolled as fulltime students and therefore not eligible to sit for these exams. If credits/marks are required by the students, this has to be discussed with the respective HoD and Professor of that particular subject. They will accordingly write a manual confirmation of attendance and give a grade.

For my studies I have chosen and passed the following courses:

- * Buddhist Theory and Vipassana Meditation (Department of Philosophy) - total of 6 SWS
- * Gender & Society; Religion & Society (Department of Sociology) - total of 8 SWS
- * Indische Literaturtheorie und Ästhetik (Department of German) - total of 8 SWS

(All without marks but recognized by my Studienprogrammleiter Dr. Martin Weiß for elective subjects)

In addition I have attended a Hindi-Course for foreigners at the Hindustani Prachar Sabha Institute, which I finalized in March with a written and oral exam (110 out of 130 marks, i.e. with distinction). Hindi lectures are also available at the university itself, though without knowing

the Devanagiri Script they might be a little bit too difficult to start with. It is, however, advisable for students to learn at least a little bit of Hindi. It is not necessary for taking lectures at the University (teaching language is English) but it is helpful for everyday's life. Even though most (educated) people in India and, for that matter, workers in touristic regions speak English, this is not always the case with general people on the street, i.e. street and market vendors, taxi drivers, waiters in smaller restaurants etc. Besides that, people here of course do appreciate it very much (and are surprised too), if foreigners show interest in learning an Indian language. If one decides to stay mostly in Mumbai and Maharashtra Marathi (the local language) is another good option.

After submitting all my references and grades from Klagenfurt to the Department of German I was invited to teach undergraduate students (BA-level) in German. I gladly took this opportunity, which made it also possible for me to extend my stay from one to two semesters. The Department of German has accommodation for Visiting Faculty in Churchgate, South Mumbai, and when the flat was ready to move in I was offered this place to stay from then on. Even though this means an approximate time of 1½ hours of travelling in each direction in order to reach Kalina-Campus, which is situated in Santa Cruz (E) in northern Mumbai, I gladly took this generous offer. Anyway I don't think that this will be a regular option for other students in the future. So for them it might be better to stay closer to the university's campus.

In my case, however, I was lucky enough to gain academic experiences in two different ways, one as a student and one as a teacher. Being a senior student even this situation was emotionally not always easy. Students here are in general very young (undergraduates start with 17 or 18) and they usually finalize their studies within the minimum time, which means they graduate with 20 or 21 and have their Master at the age of 22 to 23. So for them it was a new experience too, how someone my age can still be a student. One has to consider that Indians traditionally show a lot of respect to people, who are elder to them. So socializing in a colloquial way with an elder person is something, some of them are not used to. And even though times are changing rapidly it is still very common that women get married at an early age, have children and become housewives. That is especially true for women, who are in my age, not so much for young adults nowadays, who go for professional careers and – like in the west – tend to marry at a later point in life and want to combine children and career.

The teaching part was also a kind of clash with a different culture. Teachers, often seen as guides or "gurus" are highly recognized, means that his or her opinion is somewhat the truth or to express it more precisely they are not questioned (even if students do not agree). Therefore it is sometimes difficult to work with didactic methods as discussions or critical thinking, which for me as a philosopher is a core talent that needs to be encouraged especially in universities. This observation of course varies from subject to subject, but even my

experiences as a student of sociology showed that most students just want to pass their exams and try to write what ever they think is expected from them. There is a long tradition of oral lore and by-hearting things in India (coming from the Vedic scripts and Sanskrit traditions). This method, however, does not work very well with languages or social studies. Another issue was again the traditional respect one shows here towards elder people and such of higher status, and especially a teacher is regarded an authority. Students therefore had to get used to my different approach towards teaching and interaction between teacher and learner. It turned out, however, that this meeting of two different approaches was a gain for both sides and – especially when learning a foreign language – becoming aware of differences in those cultures is an important part of the learning process.

With these observations I would now like to lead from my academic experiences up to my personal and cultural experiences, which I did not only gain while living here in Mumbai but also while doing a lot of travelling throughout India. Since I stayed for such a long time, I was able to see almost the entire western part of India, that means the states of Kerala (all the way in the south), Karnataka, Goa, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Uttaranchal and Himachal Pradesh (all the way in the north at the foot of the “roof of the world”, the Himalayas). Being on such trips one becomes even more aware what a diverse and multicultural country India actually is. Even more do I tend to say that it is more of a union than of a nation (although not many Indians would agree with this statement) that is how much the cultural diversity, traditions and languages vary from state to state, hence even from region to region. It is not surprising if one considers the fact, that India measures about 3200 km from the north to the south and about 3000 km from the west to the east (at its broadest expansions).¹

Obviously my closest contact with Indian culture has been in Mumbai itself, where I spent most of my time. Mumbai is a huge city and definitely one of the most cosmopolitan² and modern metropolises in India. These terms, however, get a completely new connotation in an Indian context. It means in regards to city development that super modern high-rise buildings and malls stand next to slum huts and sacred temples, trees or other holy places. And in regards to inhabitants it means that you will find almost every Indian community living here (or at least trying to make their living), i.e. Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Sikhs and Parsis by religion and people from surrounding states like Gujarat and Goa (who have come here quite a long

¹ Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geography_of_India

² In Indian terms cosmopolitan means migrants from other Indian states, but of course there are also foreigners, who work and live here. Compared to a rather small city like Pune (situated east of Mumbai, approx. 4 Mio inhabitants), where due to the blooming automobile and IT industry many people from abroad live (f.ex. there are more then 3000 German nationals currently registered in Pune) foreigners are not that visible in Mumbai. Most of them come either as tourists or for short term business trips. Foreigners, who live here, are usually in higher posts or work for their respective consulate, which many of them consider as a penalty, although they receive high allowances for apartments etc. Therefore they tend to live in upscale areas and exclude themselves mostly from an Indian life.

time ago), from the south (Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala...) and – a recent development due to the economic boom of Mumbai in the past decade – from poor regions in the north, especially Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. These communities tend to stay together therefore segregation seems to be one of the key words when it comes to the question how this diverse life in India functions. And they also tend to keep up their own traditions. In everyday life this – surprisingly enough – does not lead to conflicts because the tolerance or rather respect for other cultures is widely common. Although it has to be mentioned that conflicts are there and especially right wing political parties like the Shiv Sena try to take advantage of such conflicts and even fuel them.

I adjusted quite well and quickly into living in Mumbai, because I enjoyed the bustle and vibe of the city almost from the first moment. It was an important and wonderful thing for me to tune into it. One fact that made it even easier to grow into “Indianizing” was the overwhelming warmth and hospitality most Indians would show me. I became friends with colleagues from university as well as students and was always more than welcome to their houses and to family functions (within the first three months I attended three weddings, when I did not even know the bride and the groom). I enjoyed these invitations especially because they gave me so much insight into the Indian way of family life and once more into different traditions and customs, but also to certain similarities, which seem to be there throughout all classes and castes and regional or geographical variations. One of them is tea (chai) and another one amongst several others is the best food ever (something as delicious as home-cooked Indian food cannot be found anywhere else, not even in the most exclusive and expensive restaurants), both signs of a deep rooted hospitality.

One of my first trips outside of Maharashtra was also in the company of a befriended Indian family, who was visiting the husband’s family’s deity in a small village in the inland of Goa, a state mostly known for its crowded beaches and parties. But a totally different Goa was welcoming me, lush green groves of coconut palms and beetle nut trees, flowers and plants in a variety I had never seen before, and simple but most friendly people, even though curious as always when it comes to meet foreigners (also that is generally true for all India, I would say). Some would be too shy to ask, whatever they want to know, simply in order not to bother one too much but not because they don’t want to know – and yet others would just ask anything from you within minutes. And of course I had the advantage to travel with an Indian family, who was more than willing to show me everything, and even made it possible to gain the experience of living in a Hindu temple for a few days, observing and participating in all the ceremonies and pujas.

With all these experiences in my mind I thought I knew already a lot about India, only to find out on my next trip to another state (it was Kerala where I spent my semester vacation with a

friend visiting from Austria) that I did not know much about other Indian ways of living. In Kerala for instance any knowledge of Hindi is not of much help, because not only the local language is different (Malayalam is a Dravidian language and therefore totally different from the Indo-European languages like Sanskrit, Hindi or Marathi) but people even refuse to speak Hindi. Local pride of traditions and languages is a very common phenomenon all over India (same with Marathi in Maharashtra, although it is quite close to Hindi and Hindi, especially in Mumbai, a widely spread and accepted form of communication).

Besides that after staying in India for almost six months it was in Kerala, where I had contact with foreign tourists for the first time and for that matter with Indians, who work in the tourist sector. Both of it was a sort of shock, an experience people often talk about (culture shock they call it). Something like this usually happens when you first enter a country, it never happened to me in India until then. It is quite difficult to describe, but I was already sort of estranged from Europe and it was never my aim to come to India for vacation in the first place. So I had only little understanding for the tourists' intentions and expectations and was a little surprised about the fact, how little most of them knew and even wanted to know about Indian lifestyle, especially if it would not correspond with their idea of a holiday. To give only one example, nude bathing is not common in India, not even bikinis actually. Therefore even today many Indians are not used to seeing such things and are irritated, which ends up in staring at people. That again leads to irritation and aversion on the tourists' side, who do not consider nor respect that India is a conservative country and not the country of the Hippies. Consuming drugs, especially chemical drugs like LSC or Ecstasy, would be another difficult issue in this context.

And since I had mostly avoided touristic areas in Mumbai (especially Colaba, where most of the hotels are located) I was at the same time not used to being treated so obviously like a cash-cow by Indians. (I am not saying that taxi drivers or vendors do not try to cheat you in Mumbai, but there they do it equally with everybody who is new to the city, may he/she be an Indian or a foreigner.) It took me also some time to realize that business in the tourism industry is far away from being a local business. That means once more you will find people from all over India who try to make their Rupee in tourist spots – and again very different approaches to do business. Furthermore tourism is just as varying as everything else is here from very upscale, i.e. exclusive and expensive, to simple and low standard.

One more thing has to be considered when it comes to travelling in India. Indians, who can afford to travel, are usually upper middle class and rich people, who want to travel extremely comfortably. They spare no expenses and are willing to show their wealth. Therefore you will hardly find any Indian tourists in typical western (means for people from abroad) and especially coastal tourist destinations, except for Goa maybe. On the other hand tourists from

the west, simply because they can afford the airfare, are considered rich anyway, even if they are not. Most of them, especially the young, however, come to India to experience some sort of adventure, up to a certain extent they want to feel local and experience something "typical Indian" by riding in the cheapest train class and on local busses and bargaining for the cheapest accommodation. Sometimes they actually cannot afford more than that, their budget might have been one of the reasons why they chose India as their destination. Therefore again expectations on both sides clash: here Indians, who expect "rich" foreigners to spend money, and there foreigners, who expect everything to be cheap but still with almost all the commodity they are used to from back home (after all, when you were on a hassling bus ride with "all those Indians" at least you want your cold beer and pizza as a reward, don't you...).

All these impressions on my first trip, which led me also to the state of Karnataka, where we would find a much more laid back, less developed (also less comfortable of course, because transport and accommodation are more difficult to organize) and therefore not (yet?) so commercial coastal strip, did not stop me from continuing to travel. After doing a couple of spiritual retreats in the context of my studies (one Vipassana meditation in a Vipassana centre in Igatpuri, Maharashtra and one at an abandoned beach in south Goa) my next journey was to the north for the first time, Rajasthan to be precisely. Rajasthan is one of the most developed tourism destinations in India not at least due to its vicinity to New Delhi and the Taj Mahal (the triangle Delhi - Jaipur - Agra can be found on almost every itinerary of professional tour operators). It is famous for its forts and palaces, the Thar Desert with its camels as well as cloth and jewellery.

Further trips would lead me to Haridwar and Rishikesh (Uttaranchal) at the banks of the river Ganga (Ganges), where I arrived on the last day of the renowned "Kumbh Mela", one of the largest Hindu festivals, that takes place every three years in four different places (so every 12 years it will return to Haridwar). It is an auspicious time of the year with even more auspicious dates during the festival, where babas (holy men) and pilgrims take their holy bath in the Ganga to achieve "moksha", which means as much as liberation from the circle of rebirth. It was a very touching and intense experience, especially because I have never before seen so many people at once, not even in India. Devotees from all over the country come only for this huge event and in some cases to follow their particular Guru-jis, who all would be present at such Kumbh Mela. From there, after also having taken my holy bath, I moved on to Himachal Pradesh, where the Dalai Lama has his exile in Dharamsala. Here you find a mixture of even more religions. Hinduism is omnipresent anyway, but because of the Dalai Lama you will also see a lot of Tibetan Buddhists, temples and heritages. Further up north, especially around Manali and in the Parvati Valley the trekking routes start. Here you still find quite remote places (well Manali as one of the major tourist attractions during the hot season, i.e.

summer in India in April/May, especially for Indian families and newly-weds is not one of them). The surroundings and nature are simply stunning. Although lots of effort is put into building up waterpower-plants to overcome the always threatening shortage of power in India, up to now the nature in these areas is still intact. And since streets go only up to a certain point, after which you can solely walk or use horse treks mass tourism is excluded automatically.

To end my report – and before it becomes a travel diary instead of an academic report – I would like to write about my last, quite unpleasant experience. On my last day of the trip in Himachal Pradesh I lost my passport and Indian ID. I therefore had to go to the Austrian Embassy in Delhi, where I was just heading to in order to go from there back to Mumbai. The staff at the embassy was quite supportive and I received my emergency passport within one hour. All I had to do was to file a report at the nearest police station.

After coming back to Mumbai, however, I had to go back to the Foreign Regional Registration Office to apply for an exit permit from India (it was only 2 weeks before I left to Austria), since my visa and registration stamp was obviously gone with the passport. Since the terror attacks in Mumbai on 26/11/2008 Indian authorities have become much stricter in these matters, because many of the accused terrorists were travelling on tourist visas. With the beginning of 2010 entry- and visa-regulations have been even more restricted. That is also important to know for those who come here on student visas.

Everybody, who intends to stay in India for more than 180 days, has to register with the FRRO within 14 days after arrival in India. Requested documents for the registration are: passport, visa, photos, bonafide certificate from the respective university or college, proof of residence (since there is nothing like a "Meldezettel" in India, it is quite difficult to obtain that, unless one has a proper lease agreement or hotel bill etc.) and (new now also for students) an undertaking letter, which means that an Indian citizen has to guarantee for you, as well as the guarantor's passport. All documents have to be in 3 copies.

If all that is in order you will receive a Foreigner's Registration Card (which is actually a booklet). Costs for the registration are negligible (100,- Rupees for the booklet and another 50,- for the file, you have to buy at the FRRO). If you omit to register it might end up in getting a no-return stamp in your passport and definitely will cause a lot of trouble at the immigration, when leaving India.

I had to produce almost all these documents again only to receive my exit permit plus a letter from the embassy and a copy of my loss-report from the police. As I found out after I

returned to Austria I had been already infected with Malaria³ at this point of time and was not really feeling well. Besides that it was still summer in Mumbai, which meant a temperature of around 38° C and a humidity of over 90 %. Hence one can imagine that it was not really easy to deal with all these bureaucratic hurdles under such circumstances.

Nevertheless my stay in India was without doubt one of the greatest experiences in my life so far. As you are aware, I have even extended my stay under the "KWA" scheme in order to work and research for my "Diplomarbeit" and will proceed to Nepal from here to gain even more experiences and broaden my research field. I hope that the collaboration with the University of Mumbai will continue in the future so that other students from Klagenfurt will get an equal opportunity.

WITH BEST REGARDS

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Eva Kofler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Eva" clearly legible and the last name "Kofler" written in a more stylized, connected script.

³ There has actually been a sort of Malaria epidemic this year in Mumbai, which is usually a not highly affected area. Around 35000 cases have been reported this year so far, 42 of which were fatal. (source: The Times of India, Mumbai, 02/08/2010, page 5)

In my case I was treated at the LKH Klagenfurt, receiving quinine-infusions and antibiotics for a few days and then oral medication for 14 days. Malaria mostly means hot stages and therefore a lot of fluid loss. According to the final medical reports I have been totally cured and the disease should not break out again, unless of course I will be infected again through a new mosquito bite. In case one gets infected and the disease breaks out in India there is nothing to worry about. Hospitals and doctors are well prepared and used to treat Malaria even more than in Europe, since it is a common disease. There are many high-class hospitals in Mumbai, which differ in no means from European standards in regards to qualification of their staff and hygiene.